

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Born on : April 23, 1564, Stratford – upon – Avon, England

Died on: April 23, 1616, Stratford – upon – Avon, England

ENGLISH DRAMATIST AND POET

The English playwright, poet, and actor William Shakespeare was a popular dramatist. He was born six years after Queen Elizabeth I (1533–1603) ascended the throne, in the height of the English Renaissance. He found in the theater of London a medium just coming into its own and an audience eager to reward talents of the sort he possessed. He is generally acknowledged to be the greatest of English writers and one of the most extraordinary creators in human history.

Early life

William Shakespeare was born on April 23, 1564, in Stratford-upon-Avon, England. His mother, Mary Arden, was the daughter of a wealthy landowner from a neighboring village. His father, John, was a maker of gloves and a trader in farm produce. John also held a number of responsible positions in Stratford's government and served as mayor in 1569.

Though no personal documents survive from Shakespeare's school years, he probably attended the Stratford grammar school and studied the classics, Latin grammar and literature. It is believed that he had to discontinue his education at about thirteen in order to financially help his father. At eighteen he married Ann Hathaway. They had three children, Susanna, Hamnet, and Judith.

There are no records of Shakespeare's activities between 1585 and 1592. Some have speculated (guessed) that he was a traveling actor or a country schoolmaster. The earliest surviving mention of his career in London, England, is a jealous attack by Robert Greene, a playwright, which indicates that Shakespeare had already established himself in the capital. It is hard to believe that even Shakespeare could have shown the mastery evident in his plays without several years of apprenticeship (the period of time a person works to learn a skill).

Early comedies

Three early comedies demonstrate that Shakespeare had learned to fuse conventional characters with convincing representations of the human life he knew. Shakespeare's first play is probably *The Comedy of Errors* (1590). Most acknowledge it as a brilliant and intricate farce (a humorous piece of work with a story unlikely to happen in real life) involving two sets of identical twins. The plot of his next comedy, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (1591) revolves around a faithful girl who educates her fickle (inconsistent) lover. It has romantic woods, a girl dressed as a boy, sudden changes, music, and happy marriages at the end. The last of the first comedies, *Love's Labour's Lost* (1593), deals with three young men who attempt to withdraw from the world and women for three years to study in their king's school. They quickly surrender to a group of young ladies who come to live nearby.

Early history plays and first tragedy

Though little read and performed today, Shakespeare's first plays in the popular history genre (particular style) are equally ambitious and impressive. *Henry VI* (1592), which is performed in three parts, and *Richard III* (1594) form an epic (story of heroic figures). They deal with the tumultuous (disorderly,

agitating) events of English history between the death of Henry V (1387–1422) in 1422 and Henry VII (1457–1509) assuming the



throne in 1485, which began the period of stability maintained by Queen Elizabeth I (1533–1603). Nothing so ambitious as this monumental sequence had ever before been attempted in an English play. Shakespeare's first tragedy, *Titus Andronicus* (1593), reveals similar ambition. It is recognized as a brilliant and successful piece in the tradition of the revenge play where someone tries to punish someone for a wrong that was done.

Nondramatic works

The theaters were closed because of plague (a bacteria-caused disease that spreads quickly and can cause death) during much of 1593 and 1594. At this time Shakespeare wrote two narrative poems for the Earl of Southampton. Both the seriocomic (both happy and sad) *Venus and Adonis* and the tragic *Rape of Lucrece* are based on the Renaissance traditions of myth and symbolism.

Shakespeare's most famous poems are the 154 sonnets. They were probably composed in this period but were not published until 1609. Sonnets are fourteen-line poems with a fixed rhyme scheme. Though they often suggest autobiographical revelation (the discovery or realization in oneself), the sonnets cannot be proved to be any less fictional than the **plays**.